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ON TEACHING POETRY. LITERATURE CURRICULUM V, TEACHER VERSION. (TITLE SUPPLIED).

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TO HELP STUDENTS ENJOY POETRY--ESSENTIALLY AN "UNTEACHABLE" EXPERIENCE--THE TEACHER SHOULD APPROACH THE TEACHING OF POETRY THROUGH A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL POEMS RATHER THAN PRIMARILY THROUGH AN EMPHASIS ON THE POEM'S HISTORICAL PERIOD, NATIONAL ORIGIN, OR THEMATIC CONTENT. THE DEVICES WHICH GIVE POETRY ITS SPECIAL RHYTHMIC AND IMAGINATIVE CHARACTER SHOULD BE EXAMINED BY SURVEYING A GENEROUS NUMBER OF EXAMPLES OF POEMS. A FURTHER UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF POETRY CAN BE ACHIEVED BY COMPARING IT TO VERSE AND TO OTHER KINDS OF WRITING. WRITING EXERCISES SHOULD BE ASSIGNED WHICH ALLOW STUDENTS TO APPLY THE POETIC DEVICES THEY HAVE STUDIED WHILE CREATING THEIR OWN POETRY. SEE ALSO ED 010 129 THROUGH ED 010 160, ED 010 803 THROUGH ED 010 832, TE 000 195 THROUGH TE 000 220, AND TE 000 227 THROUGH TE 000 249. (JB)

ON TEACHING POETRY

The story goes that Louis Armstrong, asked by an earnest and pedestrian researcher, "Mr. Armstrong, what is jazz?" looked at him for a moment and replied, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know."

A similar problem faces the teacher of poetry. Having already experienced the excitement and the pleasure of a good poem, he believes that anyone else who reads the poem carefully enough will be likewise moved. He feels that he knows what poetry is, why people write poetry, and why they read it. Filled with his insights, he faces a class of suspicious and pedestrian minds, and suddenly exhibits the same "inexpressibility syndrome" that Louis Armstrong did. His students are patiently waiting. They've been told they're to study poetry. They have asked, as they have every right to do, what is poetry? If they get any answer at all other than the Armstrong response, it is liable only to confirm their suspicion that poetry is an odd plant tended only in the esoteric gardens of intellectuals and oddballs.

What is it, indeed? One can speak glibly of "the poetic mode," but any attempt to isolate the components of that mode immediately runs into difficulty. This is especially true when dealing with the beginning reader of poetry, for most discussions and definitions make the assumption that the reader has already experienced poetry, that though he may not be able to define it he knows what it is. And perhaps here we have put our finger on the essence of the problem. For poetry (define it though we never can) is basically something that has to be experienced. Given the experience, one can study both its causes and its effects, using methods ranging from the descriptively analytical to the passionately impressionistic.* But the experience occurs in a region beyond the reach of the teacher, which is why we hear the frequent statement that we do not teach poetry, but only teach about it.

The teacher of poetry, then, faces a most difficult task. He must teach about something which he cannot define, assuming through an act of faith that the experience will occur, and that then his purpose and methods will begin to be clear to the student.

It is this inaccessibility of the experience itself which has led to the adoption of various approaches to the teaching of poetry, all of which tend to evade the difficulty by concentrating on material of secondary importance.

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* And here we find the reason why it is deadly to take the beginning student to the poets themselves for an answer. They all presuppose the experience, in ways calculated to dismay the neophyte as much as possible. What, to the beginner, is the value of Coleridge's discussion of the cause: "The best words in the best order"? Or of Marianne Moore's discussion of the subject of poetry: "Imaginary gardens with real toads in them"? Or of Auden's discussion of the Mode of poetry: "It is a way of speaking, a mouth"? Or MacLeish's "A poem should not mean, but be."?

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One approach has been the historical. This forces attention to those qualities of a poem which place it in its time. Such information, invaluable to the professional student of literature and interesting to anyone who already reads poetry with facility and pleasure, does not really serve to convince the beginner of the relevance and accessibility of poetry, old or new. Such an approach also inevitably suggests a specific beginning for poetry --in Anglo-Saxon verse, or medieval lyrics, or Shakespeare--wherever one happens to begin. Whereas poetry, even when we say specifically poetry in the English language, has its beginnings not in a certain poem or year but in a way of expression as old as man's imagination.

Such an historical study, once begun, works forward trying to choose some appropriate giant to represent each age, in a kind of congress of poets whose total works make up the History of Poetry. Such studies rarely get beyond the Romantic poets, or do so in such a rush that the student gets the impression that good poetry equals old poetry, and that the more remote its origin the more powerful its mysterious goodness.

Further, the historical approach requires the student to take a great deal on faith. He must accept, without knowing why, someone else's selection of the great. He must accept, without knowing why, that historical knowledge of schools and influences is important. The emphasis in the historical approach is not on those qualities of technique and value which allow us to speak with some certainty of a kind of writing as "poetry," but rather on the qualities which differentiate, which fix a poem in time and place.

Close to the historical approach, and frequently combined with it in some way, is what might be called the cultural approach. The class reads the "literature of England," or "the literature of the United States," frequently arranged chronologically. This approach also tends to divert the attention from the primary experience of poetry to its relationship to cultural history or the history of ideas--valid enough approaches, but ones which tend either to assume or ignore the primary experience.

A thematic approach to poetry seems at first glance to offer distinct advantages in leading the student to the experience of poetry. Some highly readable books about poetry have been organized around a discussion of themes. For example, in Poetry: A Modern Guide to Its Understanding and Enjoyment, by Elizabeth Drew, such chapter divisions appear as, "Time," "Death," "Social Satire," "Nature," and "Humanism." In such divisions we can see twentieth century minds touch minds of other eras, exhibiting a coherence of human concerns that makes us feel satisfyingly whole, and a little more fixed in the scheme of things than we might sometimes feel individually. And yet, such an approach still presupposes facility in simple reading. There is no getting around it--one must be able to read poetry with facility and understanding before he can perceive time, death, social satire, nature, or humanism in a poem.

It seems better, in the beginning, to allow a student to "grow easy" with poetry, to introduce him to some convenient and easily understood method of approach to any poem, whatever its national origin, historical period, or thematic content. We are concerned with as practical an

access as possible to the unteachable experience. The theoretical foundations of this curriculum, taken in conjunction with an estimate of the prevailing mental set of the era in which it is written, lead us to opt for the approach through descriptive analysis. It seems to us the best way to help the student focus primary attention on the poetry itself, and to avoid the diversions mentioned above.

For we must remember that we are dealing with beginners. To be told that this is great wonderful stuff, when he doesn't share that feeling, is to confirm the student in his suspicions. On the other hand, to treat poetry as a system or an an historical phenomenon capable of a non-poetic description or treatment is to do an injustice to the subject.

How do you make poetry accessible to someone who finds it strange? How do you give him the opportunity for familiarity? Hopefully, this year's work presents a commonsense approach to the problem--neither a "hard" nor a "soft" sell. We have combined some basic information about poetic techniques with a generous number of examples--providing the opportunity for a descriptive vocabulary capable of dealing with the unteachable experience. The concentration on form and technique is always tempered by the idea that form, in poetry as in all literature, is wedded inseparably to subject and point of view. How does the rhyme supplement the sense of the poem? Why does a poet speak through metaphor instead of simply stating his message? Such questions we hope will lead the student to the intangible experience which lies somewhere between pedagogical method and the ideal of the individual untutored response to the mode: poetry. For without that experience, man, if you gotta ask you'll never know.

To a certain extent, and most tangibly for the beginning student, poetry is the sum of all the poetic devices, all the techniques which have been used in poetic creation. Much poetic technique has become formalized through centuries of use. And yet, as has been pointed out in another essay, all conventions were once innovations. When we enumerate poetic devices we can only say what has been done, not all that might be done. For the best poets, formal technique is never a law of restriction but something that they can choose to use or not, when and how they see fit.

Moreover, though we tend to think of formalization as part of highly developed cultures, love of pattern,rhythm, and sound has been part of man's cultural history from its beginning. Once upon a time a man might not have called a certain rhythmic pattern iambic pentameter, but he would have recognized the existence of its beat. And figurative language too, to speak of one thing in terms of another, to see life as patterned, to create myth and symbol to better grasp the indefinable essence of things, is all part of the ancient human impulse to find more in existence than incoherent immediacy. Poetry, with its technique, is an attempt to render experience illuminated by imagination; illuminated--not merely decorated.

But there is pattern, rhythm, sound, figurative language, myth, and symbol in other modes as well as the poetic. We need a definition

which is both broader and more precise, to differentiate poetry from other kinds of writing. The critic Northrup Frye distinguishes between three different kinds of speech: ordinary speech; prose; and verse. Ordinary speech is not prose, but rather a kind of associative utterance usually based on phrases, fragmentary thoughts, and sentences. Ordinary speech is rarely organized into the kind of balanced and complete thought reflected in prose. Many critics have pointed out some rhythmical relationship between ordinary speech and poetry, have said that under stress, or in excitement, ordinary speech tends to display rhythm and repetition though of course it rarely approaches the refinement and order of poetry, as anyone who has tried to record overheard speech will know. Prose is the representation of ordered thought, and is based on complete sentence patterns, subject and object. The sentence, the paragraph, mark the organization of prose into units of thought. When prose is marked by characteristics we associate with poetry, such as alliteration, rhyme, or strong rhythmical patterns, it either becomes peculiar or silly-sounding, or it becomes poetry, and the distinction between poetry and prose becomes insignificant, so that we can call such writing prose poetry or poetic prose. Verse, on the other hand, is speech marked by rhythmical patterns. To say that verse is marked by rhythmical patterns does not mean only that it is metrical. A poem may be irregular metrically and still contain rhythmical patterns of sound, alliteration, rhyme, or simply cadenced phrasing. The division of poetry into lines strikes us as the most obvious visual difference between poetry and prose, and illustrates the fact that the poet's ear hears a different rhythmical basis for composition than normal prose rhythm.

This distinction between verse and other kinds of writing is based on compositional units, that is, the sentence, paragraph, etc., in prose; the phrase, or spontaneous speech in conversation; and the rhythmical unit in poetry, whether it is determined metrically or by sound patterns in some other way.

We usually think of prose and poetry as having some difference in content as well as form, though the difference is sometimes indistinct. What is fit subject matter for poetry? As already mentioned, history, myth, social criticism, religious and moral teaching, are all found in poetry as well as in prose. A narrative poem might be studied in relation to the novel or short story, but it is the rhythmical unit which differentiates it from prose. A generalization does not really take into account all the exceptions, but we come close to the nature of poetry when we think of some of the things it need not be, some of the things which are usually characteristic of novels, plays, short stories, and essays. A poem does not have to have a plot. It does not have to contain a logically organized argument. It need not have a climax, suspense, or a discernible chronology. It doesn't even have to have characters in it, though many poems do. When we say that a poem can simply express a feeling, or show a picture, that it can be organized by images and associations rather than literal ideas, we have a hint of what poetry is. In a novel, or essay, one can usually find a theme, and yet that theme is embedded in a plot or argument which takes our primary attention. In poetry, emphasis is usually on theme.

In one way, then, poetry is more direct than prose, paradoxical as this may seem. Prose which tells us such and such a thing is so, appears to be direct, and yet we are required to go along with the idea, to agree or disagree, to work it out intellectually, to overcome characters and plot to get at the idea. Poetry persuades through images, physical impulses transformed into words, by allowing us to experience. A color, a bird's name, a word like "fog" or "sun," a rhyme pattern that quickens and catches our feelings, all appeal to us directly, in an economical, sensory way.

Poetry, said Coleridge, is "The best words in their best order." A demanding and elusive definition, that one is, as we have said. But only "the best words in their best order" will communicate those feelings, those abstractions, those intimations of pattern and meaning, for which there seems to be no simple, single verbal equation.

It is this aspect of poetry which has led many critics, as well as anthropologists and psychologists, to find its origin in man's sense of the mystical and his apparent instinct for ritual. In early societies the poetic and priestly functions were frequently combined--the poet being regarded as prophet, as seer, as the vates sacer of the tribe, as having a direct pipeline to the infinite. Like dancing and music (which are other methods of imposing pattern on experience), poetry has always seemed to be associated with the ritualistic and celebratory. Elements of rhythm and repetition make poetry more easy to memorize than prose, and hence a better vehicle for the transmission of tribal or racial history and religion. Common prayers, with their rhythmically uttered petitions and praises, still exhibit this aspect of poetry. Greek drama, developing around religious festivals, used poetric elements to catch, enrapture, and move the audience, to draw the observers into the experience. Children's rhythmical games, chants, and nursery rhymes illustrate this basic natural appeal of verse and its mnemonic qualities.

Perhaps it is time to make some distinction between poetry and verse. For, as Frye points out, verse may be used to describe speech based on a rhythmical unit of composition. The term "poetry", however, implies a value judgment. Poetry is usually thought of as more serious than verse, or at least more important. The poet's skill is greater than the verse-maker's; all the elements of versification are more skillfully blended--rhyme does not obtrude itself in a merely ornamental fashion, the "best words" are chosen because they are best, not merely to fill out a line.

To be able to make such a value judgment comes only with experience, and is most evident perhaps in that once one has come to understand and enjoy a good poem, he finds lesser verse does not satisfy.

The poetic devices which are discussed in the two units of this year's work represent, then, a survey of some of the things which give poetry its rhythmic, thematic, imaginative, concrete, and economical character --a survey of some of the factors which contribute to the unteachable

experience. To say that this is a metaphor and this is a symbol is to give names to something words do, itself a tenuous act, but probably the best way in which the one who knows what poetry is and why he reads it can tell someone else and let him know. For once we have introduced a student to the poem, preferably to quite a number of poems, and led him to understand just what the poem means and some of the ways it conveys that meaning, then this is when belief must enter, belief that the poem itself will be experienced and thus do its work. It is hoped that in studying poetic technique, never as a system of rules and regulations, but rather as a survey of what has been done with good effect, the student will see that poetry speaks to him as well as to any man--and that by close reading he will come to understand and then to experience.

TO BRIDGE THE GAP

The failings of amateur verse are almost as archetypal or universal as the merits of good poetry. But this is not to say that amateurs shouldn't write poems. It is important that the students get as much chance as there is time for to write some poems of their own, for to attempt poetry is to helpbridge the distance that exists between poetry and the inexperienced reader. Though their skill may be modest, students can certainly try to express honest, imaginative, and controlled feelings about themselves, or the world as they see it. To attempt a sonnet, for example, may help them to see what MacLeish and Barker are doing compared to Shakespeare or Wordsworth. Or one might simply try to express a particular mood, and use meter, rhyme, length of line, figures of speech and so on, to help describe the mood. It is a complex problem, but the effort may have surprising results. Most important, to try to do what some recognized poet has done is to better understand the how, what, and why of his work.

Some writing exercises of different kinds would certainly help to diminish the "look-don't-touch" feeling some people have about poetry; and to learn some actual devices which have been used in poems and to try them out helps to secure the student in his familiarity to poetry.

An exercise in "group-writing" might give rise to interesting questions. That is, students compose a "poem" by taking turns adding lines which seem to them poetic. When you have a number of examples with six or more lines, have the students select those which seem to be most successful as complete poems. Do they think that it is all right to call something a poem which has been written by more than one person? Can the composition of a poem be somewhat accidental? Does the "group poem" stimulate them in any way to go on and try something of their own?

To attempt a haiku is another writing exercise frequently used in beginning classes. The Japanese haiku was originally part of a group poetic form, in which one person wrote the first part of three lines and someone else capped it with two lines. But the three-line poem has come to be a form all its own. You should have little trouble in finding examples of haiku, for many have been translated into English and the

form itself has been freely adapted by writers of modern poetry in English.

Though it is said to be impossible to translate haiku accurately, and some will say that English does not adapt well to a "true" haiku, which contains many allusions, double meanings, and references in Japanese, still the attempt at the small, tight form allows an exercise in poetic economy and imagery. The first and third lines of the haiku contain five syllables, and the second line seven. Nature is frequently the subject. There is some element of understatement, surprise, or irony in the last line, which gives a twist to the whole poem. Because of the brevity of the poem images must be strong and clear, and often the juxtaposition of two images is what gives us the surprise or irony. Rhyme and alliteration may be used.

Of course you might simply say to students that they can write a poem, however they want, about whatever they want. But with the beginner this sometimes has the effect not of freeing him but rather of casting him back onto cliches. It is not a bad idea to suggest some specific problem to be overcome. For example, ask him to write a non-rhymed poem in which line endings and sentence endings or other punctuation pauses do not coincide. When the line end creates one kind of pause, and the punctuation within the line creates another, interesting rhythmic counterpoint may result. This also would direct the student away from the sort of thumping, end-stopped verse that is common with beginners. Or have the student look up one of the circular French forms, such as the villanelle, the triolet, or roundel, and write one as an example of the effectiveness of repetition and refrain in poetry. Have him make up a metrical and rhythmical scheme and follow it, justifying it somehow by the poem he writes in the form. Or simply ask him to create a metaphor which tells something about something he has seen, or done, or felt.

Of course, writing exercises and questions on the nature of poetry are only artificial attempts to close the gap if the real meeting, the experience, does not come. In our attempts to define and justify and explain we must always return to our faith in the experience itself--if we get the student to read closely, thoughtfully, to listen, to understand, and to be aware of the tools the poet has at his disposal, then there is no need to ply him with definitions and justifications.